

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Site is NHL

Debra E. Bernhardt

On March 25, 1993, 82 years to the day that 146 workers—mostly young immigrant women—lost their lives in a garment loft fire, representatives of the National Park Service, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and New York City Fire Department dedicated the site of the fire as a National Historic Landmark. The dedication of the Asch building, nominated by the recent *Women's History National Historic Landmark Theme Study*, launched the National Park Service's *Labor History National Historic Landmark Theme Study*, a three-year search for labor landmarks throughout the United States.

The story of the fire has become better known in recent years through novels, poetry, dance, theater productions, and a television docudrama. About 500 employees of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory were at work that Saturday afternoon making the popular high-necked blouses worn with long dark skirts, the uniform of working women of the day. At 4:30, shortly after the quitting bell rang, there was a muffled explosion and smoke began pouring out of the eighth floor windows. No one knows exactly how the fire started, but one survivor afterwards insisted that a smoker accidentally dropped a lighted match into a bin of highly flammable fabric scraps.

Flames quickly raged out of control. Onlookers gasped in horror when they realized that what they had taken for burning bales of dress goods dropping from the windows were actually girls jumping to certain death. Inside the inferno, locked exits and a fire escape that buckled under the weight of fleeing workers hindered efforts to escape. In less than half an hour 146 perished.

The tragedy shocked and outraged the nation. An estimated 80,000 mourners marched for four hours up Fifth Avenue in a drenching rainstorm to attend the funeral of the victims. At a memorial meeting held at the Metropolitan Opera House, Rose Schneiderman, a young garment worker and organizer for the New York Women's Trade Union League, denounced the conditions under which American workers were forced to labor: "Every year thousands of us are maimed. The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred! . . . I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves, and the only way is through a strong working-class movement."

Schneiderman's speech helped to swing public opinion behind safety and industrial reform. The public was further outraged when Triangle owners Blank and Harris were acquitted of manslaughter charges even though they had made it a policy to keep doors locked during the workday. They maintained this was to prevent pilferage, but workers who had tried to organize Triangle during the "Uprising of the 20,000" less than two years earlier

Labor History NHL Theme Study—Update

The accompanying article by Debra Bernhardt discusses the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory National Historic Landmark (NHL), a key site in American labor history. Because of its importance within the context of American labor history and its educational potential, the Triangle Shirtwaist NHL is a paradigm for the type of National Historic Landmark that Congress intended with the passage of P.L. 102-101, authorizing the Labor History Theme Study.

The Triangle Shirtwaist NHL represents the experiences of ordinary men and women and the important role they play in the making of modern America. Issues involving the safety and health in America's factories, tenements, and mines might well have been forgotten in the 20th century if it had not been for the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City in 1911.

The tragic loss of life renewed and invigorated the American labor movement to work even harder to pass laws defining safety regulations for all American workers. The Triangle fire brought together New York's reformers, workers, and middle class in a coalition that demanded and won the creation of a state commission to inquire into unsafe working conditions. This commission ultimately secured the passage of landmark laws to protect the health and safety of New York workers.

In terms of understanding American labor history, the eventual success of reform efforts in New York meant that subsequent generations of American workers were able to enjoy and profit from the economic opportunities provided by the industrial revolution without risking the hazards to life and limb that resulted in the deaths of the young women who worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

Finally, this site has enormous educational potential. As Dr. Bernhardt concludes in her article, the history of the Triangle fire must be recognized and interpreted not only to understand the past, but also to instruct this and future generations. The Triangle Shirtwaist NHL continues to communicate and interpret a powerful and compelling story of the American labor movement and the exploitation of the American worker in the early years of this century. The building retains its basic integrity and reflects the diversity of America's labor history.

The National Park Service's Labor History Theme Study will identify additional sites of similar importance and educational potential. The Labor Theme Study is now in the process of gathering a list of potential sites for further study and possible designation as National Historic Landmarks.

Any suggestions regarding labor history sites to be considered in the Labor History Theme Study should be directed to Dr. Harry Butowsky, National Park Service, History Division, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC. 20013-7127, or call 202-343-8155.

—Harry A. Butowsky

er argued that it was to restrict access to union organizers. They had returned to work after a 13-week strike having gained a small wage increase, but not their demands for working fire escapes and open doors. The socialist paper, *New York Call*, editorialized, "Capital can commit no crime when it is in the pursuit of profits."

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The site is significant not only for labor and women's history, but as a crucible of 20th-century urban liberalism personified by Frances Perkins and Senator Robert F. Wagner. Perkins, a social worker who went on to become the first woman to hold a cabinet office when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed her Secretary of Labor, witnessed the carnage of the Triangle fire as a chance observer. Wagner, a German immigrant who had become active in Tammany Hall politics on the state level, established the New York State Commission to Improve Factory Safety for which Perkins worked as an investigator. The Commission's shocking findings, gleaned from crawling through the rooms and cellars of factories and tenement houses across the state, resulted in passage of 36 new labor laws by 1914, forming the foundation of New York State's Industrial Code, a model for the nation. As Roosevelt's legislative whip, Senator Wagner two decades later led the fight to enact many legislative pillars of the New Deal, including the National Labor Relations Act which bears his name.

The ILGWU marked the 50th anniversary of the fire with a commemorative attended by Eleanor Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, and several survivors of the fire. The fol-

lowing year Leon Stein's definitive history of the fire, *The Triangle Fire* was published. Since then, the site has taken on an almost mythic significance to the labor and women's movements. It has served as the focal point of many demonstrations: an International Women's Day observance staged by the Coalition of Labor Union Women, a Workers' Memorial Day rally marshalled by the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, and a

recent demonstration supporting contract demands by clerical workers at New York University, which now owns the building and uses it as a classroom facility. It is the first stop on the labor history bus tour organized by the Metro Labor Press Association as well as the site of the annual observance staged by the ILGWU and the NYCFD. These March 25 events often include speeches by labor and political leaders, and a performance of the ILGWU Union Label Chorus. Invariably, the program ends with the tolling of a fire bell for each of the fire's victims and the dramatic extension of a fire engine's ladder to the sixth floor, just short of the location of the victims who were engulfed in flames on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors.

The social and political meaning assigned to the site can perhaps be appreciated by looking at two recent observances. In 1990, the ILGWU staged a rally in support of striking workers at Domsey Trading Company, a used clothing exporter. Haitian, Dominican, and Puerto Rican strikers exhorted the crowd which broke forth in multilingual slogans and spirited strike songs. Speakers tied the experiences of young immigrant workers at Triangle to their own. In 1992, an African-American survivor of the Hamlet, North Carolina fire which killed 25 workers in a poultry processing plant, mesmerized the audience. His message was tied to organized labor's campaign to revitalize occupational safety and health provisions which the Reagan/Bush administrations had allowed to languish.

As the demography of New York's workforce changes and garment manufacturing remains an entry into the workforce for successive immigrant waves, it is very appropriate that the history of the Triangle fire be recognized and interpreted. As with other landmarks of American workers, the Triangle site is laden with the weight of unrealized aspirations.

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Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Building entrance. Photo by Andrew S. Dolkart, 1989.



Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Building (Brown Building), 23-29 Washington Place, New York, NY. Photo by Andrew S. Dolkart, 1989.